Parent Involvement and Child Internalizing: Differences between Maternal and Paternal Parenting

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Introduction

• Previous research has shown that high parent involvement is related to child outcomes such as better self control, responsibility, academic performance, and classroom behavior (McWayne et al., 2004).

• Research has also shown that over-involvement, such as over-protectiveness, is associated with higher rates of child internalizing. However, warmth and engagement are associated with lower rates of child internalizing (Bayer et al., 2006).

• Some research has suggested that paternal involvement is associated with lower child internalizing than maternal warmth (Pinquart, 2016).

• Most previous studies only focused on maternal parenting, despite potential differences between maternal and paternal influences. The present study aims to compare maternal and paternal parenting.

• We hypothesized that high maternal and paternal involvement would be associated with lower child internalizing.

• We also hypothesized that associations with paternal involvement would be stronger than maternal involvement.

Participants

The present study uses data from Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing, a 15 year longitudinal study with 4,838 participants.

Participants: 48% were female and 52% male 48% African American, 27% Latino/Hispanic, 21% White non-Hispanic, 4% Other 76% unmarried mothers.

The present study uses data from Year 5 and Year 15.

Method

• We conducted four linear regressions in SPSS. See Figure 1 - conceptual model.

• Models examined the following associations:
  – Maternal involvement at Year 5 and child depression at Year 15.
  – Maternal involvement at Year 5 and child anxiety at Year 15.
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• We also investigated associations between child race/ethnicity and sex and child internalizing.

Measures

Parent involvement:
Parents answered an eight item survey. Items ask how many times a week the parent spent time doing certain activities with their child. Activities include “Sing songs or nursery rhymes with (CHILD)” and “Play inside with toys such as blocks or legos with (CHILD).”

- Maternal: m = 37.169, sd = 9.314
- Paternal: m = 31.651, sd = 10.143

Child internalizing:
Depression is measured with five items from the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (m = 17.00, sd = 2.992)

Anxiety is measured with six items from the Brief Symptom Inventory 18 (m = 19.123, sd = 3.910).

Results

• The associations between maternal parenting and both child depression and anxiety were not significant (p = .158 and p = .321, respectively).

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• Girls reported significantly lower anxiety in the model investigating maternal involvement (b = -.530, t = -3.745, p = .000) and lower anxiety at a trend level in the model investigating paternal involvement (b = -.347, t = -1.817, p = .069).

• Girls reported significantly lower depression in both the model investigating maternal involvement (b = -0.586, t = -5.426, p = .000) and paternal involvement (b = -0.453, t = -3.114, p = .002).

• Latino/Hispanic children had significantly lower anxiety compared to white children in both the model investigating maternal involvement (b = -.441, t = -2.105, p = .035) and paternal involvement (b = -.530, t = -2.040, p = .042). Latino/Hispanic children also had significantly lower depression compared to white children in the model investigating paternal involvement (b = -.638, t = -3.211, p = .001) and at a trend level in the model investigating maternal involvement (b = -.291, t = -1.815, p = .070).

• African American children had significantly lower depressive symptoms compared to white children in model investigating paternal involvement (b = -.427, t = -2.412, p = .016).

Discussion

• Our first hypothesis was not supported. Higher maternal and paternal involvement at Year 5 were not significantly associated with child internalizing at Year 15.

• Our second hypothesis was not supported, although the link between paternal involvement and child anxiety approached significance (p = .11).

• We were surprised that female children tended to experience less internalizing symptoms. Previous research has shown that girls tend to experience similar or more internalizing issues than boys (Ghandour et al., 2019). Future studies should further examine the sex differences found within the current sample to better understand what might account for these differences.

• We also discovered that Latino/Hispanic children tended to experience fewer internalizing symptoms than white children.

• There are a few limitations to this study. Since data comes from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study, most of the participants were unmarried. Future research might compare the differences between married and unmarried parents.

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